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General Paschal N. Strong

Donna Thomas

Debbie Ulmer

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Recommended Citation

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PERSON BEING INTERVIEWED: GENERAL PASCHAL H. STRONG

INTERVIEWERS: Donna Thomas and Debbie Ulmer

A It was September 24, 1901.

I Is that when you were born?

A That's when I was born.

I Did you ever leave Savannah at any time?

A Yes, many times. I went through public schools, got through high school in 1918, then went straight to West Point, graduated from West Point in 1922, the baby in my class. I was only 20 when I graduated.

I Didn't you finish school kind of quick?

A Yes, I did.

I Why did you go to West Point?

A Because I wanted to be an Army Engineer. I wanted to be an Engineer in the Army of the United States.

I I see.

A You see, they take care of all our harbors, grade our rivers, build flood control dams, then when we're at war they help our armies get from one place to another and cross rivers and oceans and what not.

I When did you become interested in being an Engineer, like when was that?

A When I was a small boy.

I Any particular reason?

A Well, there was a Colonel of the Engineers in Savannah who was a friend of my family and he told me stories about West Point, gave me some books to read about West Point and I got interested. Incidentally, later on after I was grown up I wrote some books about West Point too. They got other boys interested.

I Oh, what was the name of some of those books that you wrote?

A See that bookcase over there, it's filled with either books of mine or books containing short stories that have my short stories in them.

I Your short stories?

A Yes.

I When did you start writing?

A In Savannah High School.

I Really.

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A I wrote many stories for the Blue and White Magazine. We had only one high school then, and I was a reporter on the Savannah Morning News at the age of 16, before I went to West Point. During that summer all the men folks were off to war, the first World War, so I had to do a lot of stuff that ordinarily wouldn't have been given to 16 year old boys. My education grew fast.

I Wow, where did you live, like when you were born, as a little boy, where did you live, what part of Savannah?

A I lived on Gordon Street, close to Massey School. I lived around the park extension for most of my boyhood days.

I Has it changed much today than it was then?

A Yes, it's changed color - it's changed color. When I was a boy, the river was full of sailing ships, great big sailing - square riggers you know with the tall masts and big sails. We had steam ships, but there were still a lot of the old sailing vessels of the old days. I use to run down to the river and row across the river. It cost a nickel to be rowed across the river by a black boatman. The boatman was old so he'd let me cross free, then I'd climb up and take an oar.

I You'd help row?

A Well, he'd let me pretend I was helping row.

I Oh.

A I don't think I was very much help to him.

I What other things did you do for entertainment when you were a young boy in Savannah?

A To entertain myself?

I Yes.

A I had a sail boat I built myself and I use to spend my summers sailing up and down the coast. I made some good sail boats.

I Where did you go?

A Brooklyn.

I Oh.

A They don't do those things today do they?

I No.

A Well, we did then. We made a lot of our toys in those days and everything that we wanted we built, that we could.

I Yeh.

A I've been a sailor all of my life. I have a sail boat in front of my dock now that I sail to the Bahamas in every year, sail about two months in the Bahamas. It's right down at the dock now.

I Did you build it too?

A Oh, no, that's the only boat - oh, I built one other boat in the Phillipines too. When I was a Lieutenant of Engineers in the Phillipines, I built a boat and sailed half way around the Phillipines and back.

I How old were you when you built the boat when you were a boy?

A 14.

I How did you know how to build it?

A I didn't. I learned the hard way - I learned the hard way. I'll show you some things of mine over here. When I was a boy, we had street cars like this out to Vernon View, Montgomery and Bealieu.

I Street cars all out here?

A Not across the bridge, but to Burnside up to Montgomery and Bealieu. The world was very young then. This was in the antediluvian days, before the flood.

I What flood?

A Noah's flood.

I Oh. When you wrote your stories, what age group were you writing them for?

A Teenage boys.

I To interest them in West Point?

A Well to interest them in any adventure. I didn't just write about West Point. I wrote a lot of sport stories, a lot of sailing stories, a lot of mountain stories. I wrote about everything.

I Do you think that boys aren't as adventurous now as they were then?

A Oh, I'm sure they are - I'm sure they are. They have much more chance to be. They should be more adventurous.

I You said you had your own plane, when was this?

A From 1946 to 49, I was in charge of the United States Engineers in Savannah and I had my own little plane - flew around during then. I sold it when I went to Japan. I was the Chief Engineer of the 8th Army in Japan. Then when the Korean War started, I was the Chief Engineer in Korea, the Army Engineers.

I How did the war affect the people in Savannah?

A What war?

I Okay, let's see, what was the first one you were in?

A I was a Cadet at West Point in World War I. I was in World War II, I was over in Europe in World War II.

I How did World War I affect Savannah?

A Well, all the young men went to war and all the old men stayed home and died of influenza.

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I That was an epidemic?

A Yes, a very bad epidemic, very bad the winter of 17 and 18, hundreds of thousand of people died all over the country. We built wooden boats in Savannah then during World War I, because we were best equipped to because of all the pine forest around here. When all the young men went off to war, I was 16 in 1918, the war ended in 1918, in September of 1918, so I didn't participate very heavily in the victory for the troops. In World War II, I was a more active participant.

I How did it affect Savannah?

A Oh, I was over in Europe then.

I Yeh, didn't you hear?

A Well, in Savannah everything was rationed, gasoline was rationed, fuel oil was rationed, food was rationed. Everything was rationed then. Automobile cars were rationed. You had to get a coupon for almost everything you bought in World War II.

I When cars first came to Savannah, were you in Savannah?

A Sure. Cars came to Savannah the turn of the Century and that's when I was born. I stole my first car at the age of 11.

I You did what?

A I stole my first car at the age of 11, drove it around the block.

I What made you steel the car?

A I wanted to drive it around the block.

I Were the keys left in?

A In those days, cars didn't have keys.

I How did you start it?

A You turned the switch. The only key was a switch you know. Turn it, that's all you had to do.

I Were a lot of cars stolen back then?

A No, because there were too few cars and too few people knew how to drive. Very few were stolen.

I How did you know how to drive it?

A I don't know, but I did. I guess I learned. My father had a car so I guess I learned from watching him.

I Your first car, is that the only car you ever stole?

A The only one. I drove it all the way around the block during Sunday School.

I What did you do, skip Sunday School?

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A Yeh, I skipped Sunday School.

I Did you get caught?

A No, my grandfather was Rector of St. Johns Episcopal Church then, good thing he didn't catch me, isn't it?

I Do you remember when the electric lights came to Savannah?

A Yes, when I was a small boy, we had gas lights and I remember very well when we had electricity put in the house and all you had to do was switch on the bulb and you had lights. With the old gas lights you had a wax taper on a tall stick and you put the taper to the gas and low and behold there was light.

I About what time did lights come?

A Electric lights. Just after the turn of the Century, oh they were generally installed in 1910.

I When did your family get them?

A Oh, about 1910. Before that we had gas lights.

I What did your father do for a living?

A My father was a Civil Engineer.

I Did the depression affect your family very much?

A My mother was a graduate of Vassar, then a school teacher, then a principal of schools in Savannah. She was principal of several schools in Savannah. My uncle was superintendant of schools. My mother was Katherine H. Strong, she was principal of Charles Ellis School, before she retired.

I Where did you go to school?

A Savannah High.

I How about elementary school?

A I went to Chatham Academy. Started off at the Pape School. Pape School was a school for girls but they had to have boys there for the first two years then I went to public schools, chiefly Chatham Academy, which is on Oglethorpe and Drayton, you know where it is. They don't call it that now but it was called that then. After that, I went to the other end of the school which was Savannah High School.

I Savannah High was down town then?

A Oglethorpe and Bull.

I When did they move it?

A They didn't move it they just made additional schools. Oh, they built the new school about 1932, roughly about 40 years ago. They built the new school, where was it, on 47th Street, isn't it? Isn't that where Savannah High is now?

I On Washington Avenue.

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I I don't know. Was the area around Washington Street very developed?

A At that time, yes. When I was a boy, mostly cotton fields when I was a boy.

I What part was developed.

A Well between - as far as Victory Drive was developed and beyond Victory Drive was chiefly cotton fields.

I Who owned the cotton fields?

A What.

I Who owned them?

A The farmers. Does that surprise you? Who would you expect to own the cotton fields except the farmers.

I Did the Cotton Exchange operate when you were a boy?

A Oh, yes, it was operating way before the Civil War.

I How long did it operate?

A It was still operating when I left Savannah in 1918. Is this thing still running?

I Yes, sir.

A I'm probably too far away from it to be heard. We use to play football games in the park extension. Do you know where the Park Extension is?

I No.

A You know where Forsyth Park is?

I Yes.

A Well, park extension is the park south of Forsyth Park. It's cleared, it doesn't have any trees, it has a big Confederate Monument.

I That's where everybody played football?

A Yes and baseball, basketball was just beginning to come in then. We didn't have a stadium like they have now, except we had a professional baseball stadium, a professional baseball team just like we have today.

I What was the name?

A Savannah Indians.

I Was it part of the Braves?

A No, not that long ago.

I Did you ever go down to the beach?

A Yes we went down on the train. We had a railroad train that we went down to Tybee on. We didn't call it Savannah Beach, it was called Tybee. We had a railroad train that ran down that was before the highway was built. The high-

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A The world hasn't changed very much, people haven't changed.

I Do you think technology has changed?

A Technology is always changing, it's a changing world itself. It has changed the physical aspects of the world very much indeed. Air travel and everything else we have. We always travelled by train or going up to New York when I was a boy we went by steamship from Savannah to New York. It took 3 days, 3 delightful days by steamship. We all went to college on the steamships and came back from college on the steamships.

I How long were you at West Point?

A Four years from 1918 to 1922.

I Did you go directly into the Army after that?

A Yes, that's what you go to West Point for. I was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant.

I How long were you in the Army?

A I started at West Point in 1918 and I retired in 1954, 36 years isn't it, including West Point? I retired almost 20 years about 19 1/2 years ago.

I Do you think the Army has changed very much?

A Oh, very much.

I In what way?

A Oh, I could talk about that for hours.

I Well, what are some of the ways?

A Well the Army gets paid a great deal more than it did back then, and at that time we had a very small Army, because after World War I, there was never going to be another War, never. The country begrudged every cent it paid to the Army and Navy and the Air Force. The result was that when World War II started, we were completely unprepared and if England hadn't been holding the value force from 1939 until 1942, we would have been in a very bad way indeed.

I When did you become a General?

A In 1952 or 53.

I Did you ever meet any real interesting people through the Air Force?

A Through the Air Force, you say?

I The Army, I'm sorry the Army.

A Well I had lunch with Churchill once on his private train in England, because by that time I was commanding the southern part of England to logistically map the invasion of Normandy in World War II. I had lunch with President Truman in his airplane when he and I were flying over a flood over the Ohio River when I was in charge of the United States Engineers on the Ohio that would have been about 1951. So there were two impressive people I met.

I When you become a General, is there a ceremony?

I Did you?

A They have a parade for you and what not, one or two things like that, nothing very impressive.

I What did they do for You?

A Nothing to speak of, just congratulated me.

I Who congratulated you?

A Oh, my friends.

I I mean like, was the President there?

A Oh, no, not an earth shaking event at all. Oh, no, the President wasn't there.

I Did you ever know General Patton?

A Very slightly.

I What did you think of him?

A Thought he was a very fine General.

I Has the discipline in the Army changed much since you were in there?

A The Army has to change if it's going to keep abreast of modern times. The Army has to change to keep abreast of today. The old Army of a hundred years ago the Army of World War I wouldn't do for World War II and World War II wouldn't do for World War III. You have to always keep armies up to date with technology, your best weapons and hopefully your best men to command and to fight.

I Do you think there's going to be a World War III?

A There already has been, hasn't there?

I What you mean?

A I mean there's always been wars, haven't there.

I Yes.

A Peace times are very unusual times. There always have been wars in the history of mankind, so I don't see why we should think that mankind has suddenly changed.

I That's true.

A And naturally we are living in the laws of the jungle, the strongest devours the weak. We will be devoured by our enemies if we permit them to be stronger than we are, that is axiomatic. Do you know what axiomatic means?

I No.

A Axiomatic is something playing it safe; for instance, have you ever studied Geometry?

I Yes.

A You must have had axioms in Geometry. Sure, axioms is where the straight line

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A but anyway it's axiomatic, not always true.

I Why isn't it always true?

A Because it isn't true on a curved surface. The shortest distance between two points on the surface of the earth is a great circle. You probably don't know what a great circle is.

I What do you mean, like the earth?

A Well a great circle on the surface of the earth, and the shortest distance between two points on the earth is a circle, it's not a straight line. So you see a straight line isn't always the shortest distance between two points. This doesn't have much to do with Savannah does it?

I No, but that's Okay, it's interesting.

A I remember when the Savannah Bank and Trust building was built. You know where that building is.

I Down town, the big gray building.

A The highest building in Savannah, the bank building. I remember when they drove the piles for that. I remember when we had the street cars for a nickel a ride any where in town for a nickel on the street cars. Fire Engines had horses, we didn't have any trucks then.

I When did they get the trucks?

A About some time after 1912, we began to get trucks.

I When they had the horses that pulled the wagons, did they have fire plugs back then?

A Yes, they had fire plugs. They go back 100 years. You would be surprised how many things go back way before the time you were born. I rode in my first airplane 52 years ago.

I When was that?

A In 1921 at West Point.

I When were planes invented?

A The Wright Brothers flew their first plane in 1903. The Army bought its first military plane back in 1908.

I Well, you don't remember when the Wright Brothers were flying do you?

A When they first started you mean?

I Yeh.

A No, I was only 2 years old then.

I No I guess you don't. Did you ever meet Henry Ford?

A No, I never did.

A Oh yeh, he had a plantation and some land at Richmond Hill on the Ogeechee River. He didn't live here. He was trying to raise golden rod to make artificial rubber out of golden rod. That's what he was experimenting with, but it didn't work out.

I Was that plantation - is that Kilkenny?

A No.

I Is it near there?

A I forget the name of it.

I Do you remember anything about the old fort in down town Savannah?

A Well, we still have it, don't we? We still have Fort Jackson. We still have the fort where the Gas Company is.

I This was an old fort that they called the old fort, near St. Julian Street

A Yeh, we still have it, that's where the Gas Company is.

I That's it?

A Yeh, my grandfather built Fort McAllister on the Ogeechee River, which fought off all the attempts of the Yankee Navy to conquer it, but it did fall to Sherman when Sherman attacked it from the land side. My Grandfather Hartridge.

I When was the old fort used? Was it used in the World War or in the Civil War?

A It was back about the Revolution.

I Really.

A Further back than the Civil War. In the Civil War, we used Fort Pulaski until it was captured.

I Did we use any forts near Savannah.

A We had a lot of forts to keep the northern Navy from coming in, yes we still - see Fort McAllister State Park, it's on the Ogeechee River. Fort Screven is right on Green Island, it's two miles from here. People think of Fort Screven, they think of it at the mouth of the Savannah River, you know on Savannah Beach, but that was named after the original Fort Screven, which is over here. The old forts on Causton Bluff, which was principally built during the Revolution battle for the seizure of Savannah. Savannah has not had a very fortunate military history.

I What was it like at West Point?

A It's hard to tell you in just a paragraph or two. It's a wonderful place. You get a fine education and you get a spirit of team work. You get a tremendous sense of personal integrity and honor, that's the chief virtue of West Point. The sense of integrity that it gives to its graduates.

I How does it accomplish this?

A It's very difficult to say. They have a honor system and that's absolutely tight and as close as it can be. No cadets permit any other cadets to cheat.

A Two books on West Point and that honor system goes all the way through it. The character of the boys who are going to West Point.

I Are they good guys or bad guys?

A Oh, they're good guys. I don't write about bad guys. I like the bad guys too, but guys that go to West Point end up as good guys. Sometimes they start off as bad guys, but end up as being good guys.

I Were boys ever sent to West Point?

A What do you mean sent?

I Not on a voluntary basis.

A Oh, for heavens sake no. Oh, no, West Point's not a prison. Who could send a boy to West Point. Boys fought for the honor of being appointed.

I Really.

A You're appointed by your Senator or by your Congressman, you know. Boys go to tremendous lengths - they studied years ahead of time to get the honor of being sent there.

I Do they have the highest grades?

A Yeh, you didn't send a boy to West Point, you sent a boy to Harvard or Yale. They can't force him to go to Harvard or Yale or West Point. They got to pass the exams. You can't force a boy to pass an exam, can you?

I No."

A I didn't think so.

I Is the academic really tough.

A Yeh, it's a very tough academic course. People think we spent a great deal of time learning military history and a lot of military stuff, but that's not true. They spend almost all the time on academic stuff. They learn their profession after they graduate from West Point.

I Being an officer?

A Being an officer and going through the schools in the service. The services have all sorts of schools, one degree after another.

I Did you go to school with anyone who became famous afterwards?

A General Maxwell D. Taylor, who was military advisor to Jack Kennedy and Johnson. Became quite famous, that's the only one.

I To become a General, do you have to have gone through West Point?

A No indeed. You have to demonstrate your capability and ability.

I How many generals are there in the United States?

A I don't know. I honestly don't know.

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A There are only two five star Generals I think in history, maybe three - MacArthur, Eisenhower and Marshall and Bradley. How many is that?

I Four.

A That's four. No there aren't many who make five star generals, very very few. Can you think of anything else? This must be hard to conduct an interview of this sort, isn't it? After you read it you will think of all the questions you should have asked me.

I That's right.

A You can always get me on the telephone if you want.

I When did you write the story about the Phillipines?

A I wrote that in the 1930's when I was in the Phillipines.

I Was your family with you?

A Sure, peace time we take our family with us. I have a big family, 2 girls and 2 boys, 16 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

I Wow.

A All you have to do is to get to be old enough. How old are you?

I 19.

A 19. My wife was 18 when she married me and I was 21.

I Where did you meet her?

A At West Point at a dance. She came from New York City.

I Did she like living in Savannah?

A Oh, yes she loved Savannah.

I Did she ever want to go back to New York?

A No, just to visit.

I Did she ever say why?

A Well New York, a person doesn't feel, unless they have lived there long time, that they really have their home there and I took her away from there when she was barely 18, and she's been living a long time away from there.

I What is it about Savannah that people like, physical or the people.

A Physical and the people if you meet the right people. Are you a Savannahian?

I Oh, yes.

A Savannah consists of three cities, did you know?

I No.

A I'll tell you what the three are. The old city of the Civil War from the River to Gaston Street; that's the old beautiful Savannah. Then there's Savannah that was built after the Civil War when Savannah was poor as Church mice and there was all that area of wooden frame houses between Gaston Street and Victory Drive. Why it hasn't burned down a dozen times I'll never know. And then there's the new Savannah, which is the 20th Century Savannah, which is Victory Drive and beyond, which is the beautiful modern city of Savannah. But the old city of Savannah is only one square mile from Bay Street to Gaston Street. That's the city that's being restored now. So you see Savannah is three cities. Before the Civil War and after the Civil War before the turn of the Century and then the new Savannah.

I I never thought of it like that.

A The new Savannah is a beautiful town, but it isn't any distinct character the way the old Savannah has. And the middle part of Savannah which was built when Savannah was very very poor, recovering from the Civil War is nondescript wooden houses with a few exceptions of course.

I Why do you live out this way?

A Because I love the salt water. I love boats. I love the salt water and I love to live out here.

I How long have you lived out here?

A Well, I lived here from 46 to 49 when I was in charge of the Army Engineers here and when I retired in 54 I came back here.

I After you were at the Corps of Engineers, where did you go?

A After I retired from the Army you mean?

I You were in charge of the United States Engineers here.

A Yeh, the title is U.S. District Engineer, that was the official title. After that I went to Japan as Chief Engineer of the 8th Army and after that I went to Korea. Then I came back and took charge of the U.S. Engineers in the Ohio River Valley from New York state to the Mississippi, then I retired.

I And because you love Savannah so much you came back here?

A My roots are here. My family has been here for many generations.

I Do you know when your family first came to Savannah?

A About the first part of the 19th Century, about 1810 I think. Some where around there.

I Where did they come from?

A England.

I All of them?

A On my mother's side and on my father's side too. My father's side they came from New England. The first George N. Strong hit New England about 1631 shortly after Plymouth was founded. That was back a long way.

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I Because most people are just a little bit of everything.

A Well, I'm English on both sides.

I Did you build this house?

A I had it built when I was a Captain in the Army in 1937. My brother built it he was a building contractor. He was a graduate of Annapolis but he didn't stay in the Navy. He came back to Savannah when he graduated in 1925. His son now operates the building contract firm, the Walter H. Strong Company.